

## HOMELESSNESS IN NICEVILLE



### General Information

The Town of Niceville is a bedroom community (population 60,000) located seventy-five miles from a large metropolis in the Northeast. It has always had a small, relatively constant sized homeless population. However, recently the number of homeless has been steadily increasing. Tension has mounted as the homeless have become more visible in the town. A prominent national newspaper has published an article ranking Niceville as the town with the largest number of homeless of any of its size (attached). This caused great distress in Niceville. The town has always prided itself on its commitment to providing shelter and social services to the homeless.

The Third Avenue Service Center is the town's homeless shelter. It has one hundred beds and a budget of \$1 million a year. It is located in the downtown commercial district and is publicly funded through the municipal and state governments. The shelter is well established and has a professional staff. There have been some complaints that the building is not well maintained, but in general it provides adequate service.

With the publication of the poll and a newspaper article indicating the increasing number of homeless, the Ledbetter Foundation of Niceville has announced that it will make homelessness a priority. It has invited interested groups to participate in a forum to decide how a \$500,000 grant will be spent. Group representatives will present their own projects and serve as a community advisory board.

There are six parties involved in the upcoming meeting: a representative of the Ledbetter Foundation and representatives from five different organizations that have been asked to participate in the meeting.

**Foundation Representative:** The Ledbetter Foundation has a long history of supporting education and the arts in Niceville. The foundation, motivated by recent publicity, has decided to address the homelessness issue in Niceville through a one-time grant of \$500,000. The foundation representative has been instructed by the Board of Trustees to select one or more of the proposed projects that will directly improve the lives of the homeless in Niceville. The board is very interested in using its grant to bring together the relevant stakeholder groups and build consensus. Though the Board of Trustees reserves the right to make final decisions, they will go along with any decision that is approved by at least four of the invited participants at the

meeting.

The foundation representative has a master's degree in public administration from a prestigious university and fifteen years of experience working on education and arts-related issues. However, like the foundation itself, the representative has very little direct experience with grantmaking on the issue of homelessness. Being liberal minded, the representative is open to new ways of dealing with the problem. The representative's skills as a facilitator and consensus builder makes her an excellent choice to chair the meeting.

***Shelter Operator, Third Avenue Service Center:*** The center is a nongovernmental organization (510c[3]) funded by the municipal government (\$600,000) and by the state directly through the governor's office (\$400,000). The shelter has served the community for thirty years and has always been located downtown. The operator is a former social worker promoted to a supervisory position who has worked at the Service Center for twenty years. The operator has years of experience deflecting charges that the center is inadequate for various reasons. He believes strongly that the center is the only institution that can meet the needs of the homeless.

The center is seeking support for two different projects. For the first proposal the center wants to expand current operations from 100 to 120 beds and to renovate the building. The center has a long history of helping the homeless and operates efficiently if beds per night per dollar is used as the measure of performance. The center is underfunded, so there is also a need to increase maintenance and upkeep of the building. According to the operator of the Service Center, the increasing visibility of homelessness in Niceville is a result of budgets that have not kept up with increasing demands on the Center.

The center's second proposal is to use the grant as seed money for a new initiative to develop a food-service training program. The center does not have adequate facilities to prepare food for those who use the facility. It currently supplies dinner to residents; however, all meals must be brought in. A food-service training program would make food available to the inhabitants of the center while training the homeless for jobs in the community.

***Director of the Governor's Task Force on Homelessness:*** The governor's Task Force on Homelessness works out of the state executive office and coordinates homeless initiatives throughout the state. It has some funds for projects of its own and partially funds the Third Avenue Service Center.

The director of the Task Force has designed elaborate training and self-sufficiency programs for the homeless throughout the state. The director's opinion is that emergency services in the state are adequate and that new projects should emphasize job training and self-sufficiency.

***Representative from the Homeless Union, an Advocacy Group:*** The Homeless Union is made up of homeless people and homeless advocates interested in promoting the rights of the homeless as well as self-sufficiency through political action. For eight years the organization has run a hot meal program in Straley Park. Food is donated by local restaurants and grocery stores. Staff

support comes from homeless and formerly homeless volunteers. They have a permit from the municipality to serve food in the park.

The group has approximately fifty members. Its representative is a veteran who was homeless before joining the union. As a founding member of the union he helped to develop the union's goals of discipline and a strong work ethic aimed at achieving self-sufficiency for its members.

The union wants to create a new shelter run by the homeless themselves. The union needs \$500,000 startup money for a forty-bed self-run homeless facility emphasizing self-help and a strict substance abuse program. The union's shelter would depend on its own sources of income for yearly operations. Homeless volunteers would staff and run the facility.

***Chair of the Niceville Homeowners Association:*** This is a well-established group representing 250 homeowners in Niceville. The group has substantial influence with the mayor and City Council. The primary concern of the association is to meet the needs of the homeless without lowering the property values or harming the local economy.

The chair of the association is a former mayor of Niceville and recognizes how commitments to the homeless reflect the image of the town. However, the best solution to homelessness in her view is a strong local economy that can provide jobs and training for the homeless. Efforts should be concentrated on job training, and services should be confined to the downtown business district, away from residential neighborhoods.

***Chair of the Community Service League:*** The Community Service League is a five-year-old community group that began cleaning up parks and increased the scale of its projects to city improvements of various kinds. The league owns a former school building they presently use as a child-care center. They want to convert it into a new homeless shelter. Although they have little expertise working with homeless, they have had great success in other projects. The group is made up of about one-hundred highly motivated professionals, students, and retirees. They need \$300,000 to convert the former school to a shelter with thirty beds and \$200,000 operating costs each year. The new shelter will be run by paid staff and volunteers. They have a network ready for donations of food and clothing. The child-care center is currently partly funded by the Ledbetter Foundation.

The chair of the league is a politically active, retired doctor from the neighborhood who has been influential in organizing the group. The league has been highly successful at motivating community members to participate in volunteer activities. The doctor feels the solution to homelessness hinges on providing an appropriate environment to build self-esteem and reinforce the desire to be self-sufficient. The league wants the school building to be used as the site of the new shelter.

## **The Meeting**

The Ledbetter Foundation has invited the five group representatives to a meeting at its offices in Niceville for a ninety- minute discussion of how the \$500,000 grant will be spent. The goal of the meeting is to reach a consensus on which proposal should be funded. The Board of Trustees of the foundation has made it clear that it is likely to follow the recommendation of the group if at least four of the five groups agree with the proposal. The meeting will begin with a brief opening statement by each participant.

## ***The Proposals***

Third Avenue Service Center: Expand the existing shelter by twenty beds and renovate the building.

Cost: \$200,000 for twenty beds + \$200,000 for renovation

Third Avenue Service Center: Set up food service training program in the shelter to provide food and train homeless in food service skills.

Cost: \$300,000 + \$200,000 per year

Homeless Union: New forty-bed shelter run by the homeless.

Cost: \$500,000

Homeowners: Renovate the existing shelter and close the Straley Park food service.

Cost: \$200,000

Community Service League: Convert former school building to 20-bed shelter.

Cost: \$300,000 + \$200,000 per year

## Poll Ranks Niceville Homeless Capitol of Small Town USA

*Niceville, USA* Homelessness, often thought of as a problem affecting urban areas, is not confined to big cities. Niceville, a quaint town of 60,000 with tree-lined streets, has an increasingly visible homeless population. A poll by this paper found that the residents of Niceville are more aware of the homeless than residents in any other city in the Northeastern U.S.

Though the town has a 100-person shelter, the Third Avenue Service Center, 70 percent of those with whom we spoke felt that the town does not provide adequate services for its homeless population. This compares to 40 percent in Pleasantville and 35 percent in Yorktown, both towns of comparable size in the state. According to one resident, "It seems like I can't go downtown these days without being asked for change. I think more should be done." However, it is not so clear what the residents of Niceville think should be done.

"People complain about increasing numbers of homeless," says a staff member at the town's shelter, "but our budget isn't increasing." According to this staff member, the homeless population in Niceville is made up mainly of working-age people who are transients. The shelter was filled to capacity fifty nights last year and was over capacity thirteen nights. The increase in homeless in recent years is due to cuts in manufacturing jobs in the state.

### Residents Bothered by Homeless

Niceville	70%
Pleasantville	40%
Yorktown	35%
Middletown	32%

Source: Prominent National Newspaper.

The governor's Task Force on Homelessness, which partially funds the Third Avenue Service Center, estimates that the population of homeless is growing by 10 percent a year. "We have two choices," says the director of the Task Force, "we can increase the number of beds to keep up with demand or we can offer training to get people to be self-sufficient. I prefer the latter. A training program that moved ten people a year to self-sufficiency would eliminate the need for more shelter beds in Niceville."